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Arab Jews, Mizrahi Studies and Shimon Ballas' *Outcast*

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Arab Jews, Mizrahi Studies and Shimon Ballas' *Outcast*

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Abstract

Arab Jews, Mizrahi Studies and Shimon Ballas' *Outcast*

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This report examines the novel *Outcast* by Israeli author Shimon Ballas and its themes in respect to the prominent debates in the field of Mizrahi studies. It discusses the prominent scholars who deal with the history of Arab Jews in Israel and Mizrahi studies in general. It examines these issues both in the scholarship and literature and posits that each adds to and complicates the debate. The discussion also includes the treatments of Arab Jews in modern Zionist discourse and the history of Mizrahi political and scholarly activity in Israel.

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Introduction

> Most of the Jewish communities of the Levant simply no longer exist. Those that do are but shadows of their former selves. The deeply tragic nature and complex human consequences of this fact, it seems to me, cannot be overstated and are most vividly illustrated by the effects of the harsh socialization process undergone by what have now come to be called Oriental Jews in Israel.[1]

How do Jews from the Arab world fit into the accepted history of the Middle East? The Zionist movement? How have they been portrayed in these histories, and how have they responded to such portrayal? How have they, as scholars, artists, writers and activists, attempted to write their own history alternative to the Zionist one? How do Arab Jews today work not only to shape the portrayal of their past but also work towards equality and justice in the present and for the future?

In order to answer some of these questions, this essay will explore several things. The first is an exploration of the present scholarship about Arab Jews in the Middle East and how they have been studied, especially in Israel and the United States. Through this overview I will contextualize the general field and the current discussions in it by highlighting several scholars for championing the work of Mizrahi studies and the cause of the Arab Jews in Israel today. This will by no means be a complete list of all scholars who study Arab Jews, but is instead an overview of some of the more prolific writers and some of the academic trends in the field. I will look at several issues in particular and how they are addressed in a way that counters Zionist discourse and ideology. Most of these scholars are challenging this same discourse as it relates to many things, but

[1] Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 28.Minnesota Press, 1993), 28.

specifically the Arab and Mizrahi Jews. In this challenge, many of them use post-colonial conceptions of history, and the power of creating history, to criticize the current Zionist model of Arab Jewish historiography. Some of the themes being challenged are the nullification of Jewish history in the Arab world before creation of the state of Israel, the treatment of Arab Jews as second class citizens in the Ashkenazi dominated state, and the idea that there is a correct or unified Jewish identity, history or community. Many of these themes have translated to literature and literary criticism, and I will also be discussing some of the primary literary scholars who work with Mizrahi and Arab Jewish literature.

The second half of the paper will focus on the novel *Outcast* by Shimon Ballas and how it reflects and complicates the broader themes of Arab Jewish scholarship. This work of fiction is an important example of the artistic output of the Arab Jewish community and tells the story of that community in an incredibly poignant way. While the book was originally published in 1991 in Hebrew, and most of the scholars I will be discussing have published after this date, it is still relevant to their work, as many of the issues and themes addressed in the book are still important to Mizrahi scholars today and will probably continue to be important to the field for years to come. I argue that the shifting themes of history and memory, home and exile, and loyalty found in *Outcast* articulate an Arab Jewish identity and history that can also be found in the academic and political work of Mizrahi and Arab Jews. *Outcast* can be informed and enhanced by including in it the arguments and discussions of the academic world of Mizrahi studies

over the last twenty five years. At the same time, the themes in *Outcast* complicate the scholarship and create a multi-level, multidisciplinary conversation that is ongoing.

Section I

Ingathering of Exiles

> Historical research is not an objective science like the natural sciences; it deals with people, and whoever deals with people cannot free themselves from personal predilections. And what better example for a lack of objectivity could one provide than books on Jewish history? But how is one to respond to the obvious question that comes up – are they the only fabricators?[2] Haroun, *Outcast*

The quote above is especially pertinent to this project, as it deals with the different writings of Jewish history and the different historiographies being contested both from within and outside of Judaism. The creation of history is a central part of a Zionist narrative in which the land of Israel was empty of other in habitants and exiled Jews from around the world were to return and bring it to life. At the same time, the Arab world has attempted to create a history that vilifies the Zionists and idealizes multi-religious coexistence in the Middle East and North Africa before Israel. The multiple nationalist projects in the region have been in competition for the right to the history of the Arab Jews, who are often the last to articulate their own stories. Communities that had remained intact in different Arab countries for millennia were caught up in the various political, ideological and economic movements in the region, caught on the edge and in between them all because of their minority status, and have been used to bolster these narratives ever since.

[2] Shimon Ballas, *Outcast*, trans. Ammiel Alcalay and Oz Shelach (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2007), 10.

The Zionist creation of history is incredibly relevant to those who don't fit into the narrative, namely the Palestinians and the Jews from the Middle East, who were much less involved in the Zionist project than their European co-religionists. Their story as part of a greater Arab narrative, when Arab and Jewish were two adjectives that could be used to describe the same person, has been absorbed and distorted by the discourses that claim millennial enmity. A history that is infrequently told, in Israel as well as much of the Arab world, in which there was viable and successful (although not perfect) coexistence between Jews and Arabs in the same nation and city. More than coexistence, there was integration, at least in Iraq, culturally and politically. All of this was put to an end by the catastrophic events in the middle of the twentieth century.

The term Arab Jew, referring to the Jews who live in, immigrated from or descend from the Jewish communities in the Arab world, is no longer a commonly used identity marker. The most common word used instead, and one of Israeli origin, is Mizrahi (plural Mizrahim), meaning Eastern or Oriental.[3] In contrast, the term Arab Jew helps to categorize the population I'm looking at linguistically and connect it with the surrounding world more than Mizrahi does. The term Arab Jew has been relegated to a historical identifier but not one relevant as a title for people living today. Chetrit explains how the term Arab Jews lost in the battle of names.

[3] This term is not really a geographic one but instead can be used to identify an individual or Jewish community not of European origin. The title Sephardi (plural Sephardim), originally referred to Jews who originated in the Iberian Peninsula and distinguished based on religious doctrine more than geographic locality, but is now often used to refer to any non-Ashkenazi Jewish communities. I use the term Mizrahi interchangeably with Arab Jew, although they are not synonymous. Arab Jews (in Israel) would consider themselves Mizrahim but not all Mizrahim are Arab Jews. Also, Arab Jews outside of Israel would probably not use the term Mizrahi to describe themselves. The reason I use Mizrahi is because it has precedent within scholarship, and many of the issues prominent in that scholarship are applicable to the Arab Jews.

> Worth noting at this point is another term, Arab Jews, that takes in all Jews of Arab countries, but not the rest of Eastern and Mediterranean Jewry. This term was quickly expunged from the collective memory of the Arab world's Jewry by Ashkenazi Zionist socialization that saw Arabs as inferior enemies, and their culture as unworthy and primitive.[4]

Here I am using Arab Jew to draw attention to the connections between the two groups and acknowledge the history there, but will also use Mizrahi/Mizrahim as it is preferred by most scholars and activists studying this topic currently.

After decades of war and conflict between the Arab world and the state of Israel, it's easy to see Arabs and Jews as antagonistic opposites, and yet there have been Jewish communities in the Arab world, North Africa and Iran for thousands of years. 1948 marked the beginning of the end for most of these communities, as Jews across the region were associated with the enemy state of Israel and were looked on with suspicion, while at the same time were being recruited to join the Zionist movement and align with the newly emerging state of Israel. This meant essentially abandoning their Arab homes and affiliations. Before the late 1940's, the Zionist project was a European one, and the Arab Jews were not considered an essential element of the project. Early Zionism didn't take the predicament of the Arab Jews into account.

> On the one hand, they (Arab Jews) were largely ignored by the Zionist establishment. On the other hand, some either identified with it as a revival of Hebrew culture and the Hebrew nation or else were put in the position of somehow being allied to the movement. Thus many found themselves accused of harboring a double allegiance.[5]

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[4] Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 18-19.
[5] Alcalay, *After Jews*, 47.

It was the both the push of the negative changes in Arab countries and the pull of Zionism and the state of Israel that influenced Arab Jewish immigration.

The departure from Iraq is an interesting case to examine as it was one of the most dramatic and abrupt migrations of the entire community. The Jewish community in Iraq was one of the oldest in the Arab world and was a very homogeneous one, as compared to those in Egypt and the Levant. The Jewish community in Iraq also used Arabic as its primary language, with a Jewish accent specific to Baghdad, where the majority of Iraqi Jews lived. At its peak, the population Baghdad was a quarter Jewish, with huge percentage of them living in the old Jewish quarter with the rest of the community spread out across the city. Moshe Behar, in contrasting the Iraqi Jewish community with that of Egypt, makes the argument that while the Egyptian community had a significant immigrant population, spoke a wide variety of languages and tended to be removed from the native Muslim population, the Iraqi community cannot be accused of not being "real Iraqis."[6]

Some argue, in accordance with Zionist ideas of the Arab world, that the dislocations between the Arab majority and its minority Jewry had been happening for several generations, as contact with European powers and colonialism elevated the status of Jews and Christians in a mostly Muslim Middle East. In reality, at least in Iraq, Jews and Christians were very well integrated and the two days of violence and looting that occurred in 1941 against Jews, known as the *farhud,* came as a huge shock to the

[6] Moshe Behar, "Nationalism at its edges: Arabized-Jews and the unintended consequences of Arab and Jewish nationalisms (1917–1967)," (PhD. Diss., Columbia University, 2001), 183.

community. This kind of religious violence was much more common in Europe in the twentieth century but was not at all typical of minority-majority relations in Iraq at the time, but specific political changes related to the European powers were taking place in Iraq that allowed for such events. The British, who had controlled the Mandate in Iraq before independence in 1932 and still held a great deal of power there, were struggling against the pro-Nazi propaganda that had increased in Iraq leading up to the *farhud*. German support appealed to Iraqis because it was anti-British, a popular position due to the colonial nature of Britain's relationship with Iraq. When a pro-Nazi coup succeeded in 1941 the British troops in the area effectively retook control of Iraq so as not to let it fall to German forces. It was in this context, of building anti-Semitic propaganda from the Nazis and reassertion of control by the British that the *farhud* happened. The episode was atypical of minority relations in Iraq leading up to that point, and the violence did not reach that level before the majority of the Jewish community left in 1951-52.

Moshe Behar explains the circumstances of Jewish experience as a minority in the Arab-Muslim world.

> Indigenous Jews in the Middle East did not face the same sociopolitical predicaments that their co-religionists confronted in Europe. In the Arab Middle East, unlike in Europe, a 'Jewish question' did not exist. Consequently, it was not surprising that the Jews in the Middle East did not develop national Jewish consciousness and were, instead, non-Zionists by default. Even the small number of Egyptian and Iraqi Jews who submitted to European Zionism did not take any significant part in the formation or practice of Zionism prior to their arrival in Israel (during the 1950's).[7]

[7] Behar, "Nationalism at its Edges," 221.

It was the catalytic event of the creation of the state of Israel and the war with the surrounding Arab countries that finally tipped the balance against Iraqi Jewry and mass immigration became one of the few options available to them. Communities that had been there for centuries and millennia quickly dissolved as relations between the Arab world and the newly formed state of Israel escalated tensions around the region. The importance of this moment is seen in the fact that nearly all the Jewish communities in the Arab world, as diverse as they were, met with a similar fate at roughly the same time. Thus began the ingathering of exiles from the Middle East, bringing Arab Jews from around the region to the young Israeli state, which itself had seen a drastic population shift. As Jews from Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, Syria and other Arab countries left their historical homelands, sometimes by coercion, for Israel, the United States and Europe, the foundations of Arab Jewish reality shifted.

Most pre 48' Jewish immigration to Israel, or *aliyah*, came from Europe and not the Middle East or North Africa. Thus the formation of the character of the state, under the British mandate (1922-1948) and during the struggle of the war in 48' with the neighboring Arab countries, was European and Ashkenazi in nature. Not until after mass immigration from the region began did the need to integrate an Arab Jewish history and culture become an issue for Israel and the Jewish collective it sought to represent. Zionist thought, and the reality of violence between the two communities for decades, posited anything Arab or Oriental as backwards, negative and not properly Jewish or European. Apparently even prominent leaders of the young state spoke out against the corrupting

potential of the Arab Jews on authentic, European Israeli culture, and hence sought to suppress or change that aspect of the new Jewish immigrants.[8]

The dichotomy between Jews and Arabs, as represented by the state of Israel and the Arab powers, no longer allowed for a community, diverse and historic as it was, to exist amongst the two groups. Ella Shohat describes how that shift occurred

> After the British withdrawal from Palestine, and the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Arabs and Jews were newly staged as enemy identities…with the partition of Palestine Arab-Jews, in a historical shift, suddenly became simply 'Jews.'[9]

In order to diminish the Oriental character of the Jews who had come from the Middle East and North Africa, an attempt was made by the Ashkenazi establishment to delegitimize the geographical and cultural roots of the Arab-Jews. Shohat explains how Zionist history overrode dissenting voices within world Jewry.

> The process of constructing a national historical memory also entails destroying a different, prior historical memory at whose expense the nationalist narrative articulates itself.[10]

Brenner expands on that when she explains the tenets of Zionism that disregarded Arab reality.

> To construct a collective identity around the narrative of nation building, other narratives needed to be elided. Two celebrated slogans encapsulated the intentionality of the elision: the *she'lilat ha'golah* (negation of the Diaspora), and the 'empty land,' a shortened version of the (in)famous catchphrase 'for a people without a land (Jews), a land without a people.' Both mottoes reflected the

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[8] For more information on this, see Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Vistims" page 4-5. Also, Smooha, *Israel: Pluralism and Conflict*, page 88-89.
[9] Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*. Duke University Press (2006) 205.
[10] Shohat, *Taboo*, 205.

> intention to eliminate histories that interfered with shaping the "new" Jewish national identity.[11]

In the early years of Arab Jewish immigration to Israel, large parts of the population essentially became cheap, unskilled labor in the building of the new state. The Arab Jews were seen as intellectually inferior, from backward countries, simple minded and thus "similar to Arabs." This trait was noted as a benefit for the dominant class in using the Arab Jews as cheap labor, and would be used throughout the years to negatively describe the population. This similarity was not described as a positive trait, as one that acknowledged cultural heritage and value, because there was little room in the new Jewish Zionist construction of modern Jewry for it. The Arabness of Arab Jews could be considered dangerous in a context wherein the Arabs are the enemy.

The ruling apparatus did as much as it could to first use the negative "eastern" characteristics of the Mizrahim as explanation for their lower status, while at the same time chiding them as separatists and divisive when they tried to form ethnic political groups. In the 1950's and 60's, Mizrahim and Arab Jewish political participation was funneled through the major national parties, their candidates limited to the lower echelons of the parties. The Mizrahi community tended to be anti-Labor, making them supporters of the Likud by default. It wasn't until 1971, with the Black Panther movement in Israel, and even more importantly the 1977 victory of the Likud led government in the Knesset elections that Mizrahi population gained a voice on the national stage. This period ended

[11] Rachel Feldhay Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded: Israeli Arab and Jewish Writers Re-Visioning Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 6-7.

the 30 year monopoly the Labor party had on government and the national trajectory and opened the flood gates for a new construction of the state and the national narrative.

When parties identified themselves as Mizrahi, the dominant parties marked them as divisive when what the state really needed was cooperation in the face of Arab hostility and violence, an argument that political parties would start to question as one designed to silence dissent. The Panthers were a relatively short lived protest movement that supported equal treatment and resource allotment for the Mizrahi Jewish community. This group, while often today seen as a violent, youth-driven movement of criminals, was not calling for any radical or fundamental change to the structure of the state, according to Ghanem.[12] Like the Mizrahi political parties that would follow in the years to come, the Black Panthers were willing to work within a Zionist framework and did not, for the most part, question the fundamental character of that framework but instead sought more equal representation in and treatment at the hands of the state. Chetrit explains their importance

> Although the Black Panthers did not formulate and alternative world view, they were heralds of a new Mizrahi discourse. They were also the first to draw parallels with revolutionary situations elsewhere, such as the struggle of blacks in the United States (from whom they took their name) and the Marxist struggle in South America. Their most important achievement was to place on the Israeli agenda and in Mizrahi public consciousness the discrimination and unequal economic relations in Israeli society, directly pointing out the overlap with the Ashkenazi-Mizrahi ethnic divide. The importance of the movement was that it broke the dam of silence, triggering an irreversible process of radicalizing Mizrahi

[12] As'ad Ghanem, *Ethnic Politics in Israel: The Margins and the Ashkenazi Center* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

> political consciousness that would, by the early 1990's, mature into a movement of critique and proposed alternatives.[13]

While the Black Panthers were short lived and geographically specific, they were also one of the earliest political movements to express the specific concerns of the Arab Jewish and Mizrahi population and to be vocal enough to gain national attention.

The 1977 Knesset elections were the first time the Labor party was defeated at the polls since the creation of the state, and their defeat was largely due to the participation of Mizrahim in support of the Likud party. The participation of second generation Mizrahim was an important factor in this victory, and while the election did not overthrow the dominant paradigm, it did spark awareness, activism and scholarship from within the community that was unprecedented. There came a collective recognition of the systemic problems being faced and the power of collective action and knowledge to combat those problems. In the early 80's, then, we see the rise and fall of TAMI, one of the fist Mizrahi political parties. TAMI, despite its failure, legitimized the idea of Mizrahi political action outside of the major parties like Likud and Labor, something that would pave the way for more powerful and more permanent Mizrahi political parties in the years to come, like Shas. The elections in 77' paved the way for more organized, articulate and powerful Mizrahi political action that has continued into the new millennium.

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[13]Sami Shalom Chetrit, "Mizrahi Politics in Israel: Between Integration and Alternative," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29 (2000): 53.

What I am attempting to do is tell the story of the Arab Jews, especially from Iraq, as much as possible from their perspective. Many of the academics in this field are Arab or Mizrahi Jews, and the authors writing literature on these topics certainly are. While this can be problematic in its own way, they are important to give voice to a narrative that is otherwise lost amidst the constant conflict in the region. Their historical narrative will only be another to compete with that of the Zionist one, the nationalist one, and countless others, but it's important to continue and expand that narrative nonetheless.

Mizrahi Studies

Many years of scholarship have focused on the topic of Arab Jews in innumerable contexts, and I will be relying on several prominent scholars to offer analysis on *Outcast*. I cannot claim to offer a comprehensive analysis of every scholar or thinker writing on the Mizrahi and Arab Jews today, an ambitious project that would require a great deal more time and space. Instead, I would like to discuss some of the leading figures of Mizrahi studies across several disciplines, thus discussing some of the major issues being examined. The specific field of Mizrahi Studies is a new one in Israel and the United States and has been championed by scholars from multiple disciplines who focus on the identity, history and political action of the Mizrahi Jewish community in the world today. The roots of the field lie, for the most part, in the second generation Mizrahim who were so influential in the political change of the 1977 elections. Members of this community have expanded on the political movements of that time and created an academic dialogue that adds strength to their more practical demands. In this field there has been a strong

dialogue in both English and Hebrew, although here I am limited to scholars who publish in English.

Ella Shohat, Sami Shalom Chetrit, Moshe Behar, Lital Levy and Ammiel Alcalay are all involved in illuminating the history, literature and culture of Arab Jews and each offers a different view on the relationship of Arab Jews with mainstream Israeli culture as well as with the Arab world and the Palestinians. They come from several different disciplines but all offer insight not only from their own field but from the greater discipline of Mizrahi studies. Most also advocates for a more honest assessment of the treatment of the Mizrahim in Israel and the discrimination they suffer at the hands of the dominant group. Moshe Behar explains how the line between scholars, activists and Arab Jews has been blurred.

> In the case of the Mizrahi collectivity, contexts, texts, activism and scholarship have always been heavily intertwined, leading to a correlation between activism and the production of critical texts.[14]

The motivation for this project comes largely from the work of Ella Shohat, and other prominent Mizrahi scholars, who was one of the early scholars to advocate for a "Mizrahi Studies" that explores the cultural and geopolitical past of the non-Ashkenazi Jews in Israel and around the world as well as advocating for their rights in Israel today.[15] These scholars, as well as political activists, gained prominence, and sometimes infamy, in the 80s and 90s and have advocated not only for the recognition of Jewish reality in an

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[14] Moshe Behar, "Mizrahim, Abstracted: Action, Reflection, and the Academization of the Mizrahi Cause," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 37 (Winter 2008): 89.

[15] See Ella Shohat: "The Invention of the Mizrahim," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29:1 (1999): 5-20. Also, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the standpoint of its Jewish victims" *Social Text* 19/20 (Fall 1988): 1–35. Also, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, Duke University Press, 2006.

Arab context but also for the use of the Mizrahi community as an arbiter between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Shohat's article "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims" is one of the earlier articulations of what would become her main focus, that is illuminating the poor state of Mizrahi life in Israel. Here she calls attention to the problematic of Zionist narrative not only for the Palestinians but also for the Arab Jews.

> For Zionism does not only undertake to speak for Palestine and the Palestinians, thus 'blocking' all Palestinian self-representation, it also speak for Oriental Jews. The Zionist denial of the Arab-Moslem and Palestinian East, then, has as its corollary the denial of the Jewish 'Mizrahim' (the "Eastern Ones") who, like the Palestinians, but by more subtle and less obviously brutal mechanisms, have *also* been stripped of the right of self-representation. Within Israel, and on the stage of world opinion, the hegemonic voice of Israel has almost invariably been that of European Jews, Ashkenazim, while the Sephardi voice has been largely muffled or silenced.[16] (Emphasis by the author)

Shohat's prolific work, as a scholar and an activist, over the last 25 years has helped to create an academic legitimacy for socio-political issues that have been present since the mass immigration of Arab Jews to Israel in the 1950's and 60's. She is perhaps the loudest academic voice in English on the subject of the Arab Jews in Israel. While Shohat's work is based on cinema, many of her ideas can be applied to literature. There is not a strong, positive portrayal of Arab Jews in Israeli cinema or strong Arab Jewish representation in the film industry. This is in contrast to Israeli literature, more prolific than film in general and specifically in regards to Arab Jewish authorship. There are several prominent Israeli authors of Middle Eastern descent and their work can be

[16]Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the standpoint of its Jewish victims," 1.

divided into subgenres, according to Nancy E. Berg.[17] Shohat's academic work moves so far out of cinema to encapsulate many issues of contention in Israel today. In her scholarship she advocates for a connection between the Arab Jews and the Palestinians as a way to help find peaceful solutions through shared history and culture.

Both Shohat and Sami Shalom Chetrit make a connection between the treatment and place of Arab Jews in Israel and American race relations, especially the civil rights movement. Chetrit's use of "Black Jews" and "White Jews," he claims, helps to shed light on the reality of the ethnic, socioeconomic divisions in Israel. This connection, as discussed above, is one also made by activist groups like the Black Panthers. Shohat also compares the relationship between the Ashkenazi ruling elite and the Mizrahi population as one of a Western colonizing first world power towards the third world. She is attempting to fit the specific political situation of Arab Jews into the broader post-colonial discourse, something she does successfully.[18] Her argument is one used by other authors as well, who see Israel as a settler nation similar to those in Africa colonized by Europeans.

One economic argument Ella Shohat make is that the Arab Jews were recruited by Zionists pre 48' to compete with and eventually replace Arab labor in Palestine. Small groups of Yemeni and Moroccan Jews were recruited for this purpose originally, but eventually all the Jews from the Arab world flooding into the country in the 50's were consigned to the lower rungs of the labor market. In the early years of this practice the

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[17] Nancy E. Berg, *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 151-156.

[18] See Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel." Also, Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict.*

laborers faced incredibly cruel conditions and were prevented from participating in the same political and economic organizations as the Ashkenazim. Through the years, the Mizrahi Jews have been in competition with the Palestinians for menial labor and low pay jobs in Israel, escalating tensions between the two groups.

Both authors have also sought acknowledgement of the political currents in the region in the twentieth century and the fact that the Jews, alongside the Christians and the Muslims, participated in, contributed to and were shaped by these different discourses.

> Shohat and Chetrit understand that the Mizrahi perspective needs – and has – a history that dates back to the involvement of Marxist and liberal Arab Jews in their home Arab countries.[19]

This may seem like an obvious assertion, that the Jews were politically active in the Arab world, but again the dominant discourse on such history tells a story of Arab Jewish communities as isolated, mistreated by Muslim majorities and at the same time politically ignorant, backward and uneducated. That they reached high positions in government, politics, the economy and the intellectual class flies in the face of the lives they assumed upon entering the Holy Land.

Ammiel Alcalay advocates for the literary, scholarly and critical works of Mizrahi intellectuals through his academic works. He has interviewed several Arab Jewish and Mizrahi authors as well as offered a diverse cross section of their works translated into English in his book *Keys to the Garden*. In this as well as other works, he draws attention to the gap in the American market specifically of many works of fiction and prose done

[19] Behar, "Mizrahim," 97.

by Mizrahi or Arab Jews.[20] This is one more way the population is written out of the official Israeli narrative that values the European, Ashkenazi character of the state, despite its non-Ashkenazi majority, and the way it is exported to the English speaking world. Alcalaly, in his attempt to bring the artistic contributions of Arab Jews like Shimon Ballas to the attention of Americans, is also attempting to reincorporate their history into the region as a whole.

Lital Levy, a newer academic of Mizrahi and Arabic literature, has much to add to the field in her works on the creation of the modern Israeli and Hebrew literary cannon.[21] Levy calls for an inclusion in the historical assessment of Hebrew literature of works in Judeo-Arabic and Arabic, among other languages, in order to include intellectual and cultural connections between Arab and Sephardi Jews in the Ashkenazi dominated field. She also criticizes previous authors, like Shohat and Alcalay, for their examination of Mizrahi literature and identity only as a counter to Zionism, thus making Zionism the focal point. Instead Levy contextualizes Mizrahi intellectual history within the *Nahda*, or Arab renaissance, the *Haskala*, or Hebrew/Jewish renaissance taking place in Europe, as well as other cultural and linguistic trends that predated Israel and Zionism in the consciousness of these communities. She does not simply seek to include Mizrahi authors in the Israeli literary cannon but instead acknowledges the greater intellectual trends that were sweeping Europe, Asia and Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth

[20] See: Ammiel Alcalay ed., *Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1996). Also, Alcalay, After Jews.

[21] See: Lital Levy, "Reorienting Hebrew Literary History: The View from the East" *Prooftexts* Vol. 29 (Spring 2009): 127-172. Also, Lital Levy, "Self and the City: Literary Representations of Jewish Baghdad" *Prooftexts* Vol. 26 (2006): 163-211.

century and how these trends came to shape both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi literary production.

Both Alcalay and Levy explore Arab Jewish literature on the fringes of, or at times completely ignored by mainstream literary critics and scholars. Alcalay has attempted to bring some of these authors, including Ballas, not only to the wider Hebrew speaking audience but has also worked on translating some of their work into English. Levy, on the other hand, focuses more on the literary currents of Arab and Sephardi Jews as part of greater literary and intellectual trends that came from outside of Judaism as well as from within. Both have critically examined the work of Shimon Ballas in comparison to other Iraqi Jewish authors, although neither of them has looked specifically at *Outcast*.

Historian Moshe Behar, using structural analysis, argues that the Arabized Jews, as he defines them, were stuck on the edges of both Jewish (Zionist) and Arab nationalism to their dismay.[22] He acknowledges that the Jewish communities in Egypt and Iraq remained on the edges of the Arab nationalist movement partially because historically, as a minority community they were not prone to political actions against the ruling power (the monarchy, the British, the Sultan) for pragmatic reasons, but that the main reason they were excluded was because of their inevitable association with the Zionist movement, which had become the antithesis of Arab nationalism. He finds that by looking more closely at the period before 1948 in these communities, he is able to illuminate the greater causes and aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict. He also argues that

[22] See Behar," Nationalism at its Edges."

the Zionist movement cannot be considered simply a matter of Jews versus Arabs but instead must be seen as one part of a larger movement of European encroachment into the Middle East. Behar's work offers a historical examination of the history of Arab Jewish communities before the state of Israel, something that helps to illuminate the realities on the ground for those who left and would eventually make up the greater Mizrahi population in Israel.

One last person I want to discuss is Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff and her concept of the "Levantine Generation." While Kahanoff wrote decades before the scholars mentioned above, her ideas gained the popularity in Israeli society that many of the academic works mentioned above never have, and are still relevant today.[23] This Egyptian born Jewish intellectual, journalist, and author writing in English, put forward a social model that posited a hybrid or mixed culture that could incorporate the many ethnicities, religions and languages present in the Middle East. Her use of the term Levantine was in contrast to the popular Israeli use at the time, which associated it with the influx of Arab Jews and with oriental corruption of the European-Zionist culture desired by the Israeli dominant class. Her writings were based on her youth spent amongst the cosmopolitan communities of Cairo and Alexandria during the first half of the twentieth century and affected many Israeli intellectuals and writers over the last fifty years. In her works she is proscribing a Levantine social structure for Israel and eventually the broader region, one based off of the urban centers of the past, like Cairo,

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23 See: Deborah Starr, compiler, *Mongrels or Marvels: The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011).

Alexandria, Baghdad and Beirut. Her proscription is one of the ideas posited in order to integrate the diverse group of Jews in Israel at the time, but they tended to appeal mostly to those from the Arab world. While she can be seen as influential, the Levantine social system was made up of the minorities in the Middle East as a bridge between the Arab world and Europe. So, while Kahanoff does offer an alternative to the Zionist project, one that embraces a multiplicity of narratives, she does not encourage integration into the wider region. Her voice as an advocate for Middle Eastern Jews was an important one, and she continues to be important today.

To some extent, all of these scholars are working within the Israeli context, as it so thoroughly dominates any discussion of modern Jewish identity. Here, it is necessary to take into account the greater academic trends of that context. Most of these authors write in English at least partially because much of their work could not be published in Israel, due more to politics than to the quality of the work. The movement of 'new historians' or revisionist historians that arose in Israel in the late 1980's has a lot to do with this divide. Three of the first scholars to claim the title of 'new historian' were Ilan Pappe, Benny Morris and Avi Shlaim, all associated with St. Anthony's College at Oxford. All three historians published books in 1988 that, using declassified Israeli government documents, disputed the dominant Zionist narrative of the events surround the 1948 war and expulsion of the Palestinian refugees that resulted from the war.

These authors, as well as many more who have adopted their methods in the last two decades, have come under strong attack as unpatriotic and divisive by some and as bad historians by others. There has been a very strong reaction to their work, especially

by the historians and scholars they themselves criticized. Much of their work is rejected in Israel itself, the argument being that it is over political and polarizing. Included in this movement, especially as it grew, was a desire to include gender studies, minorities and other groups that have been traditionally sidelined from the dominant paradigm. The Mizrahi studies scholars discussed above are to some degree a result, and part of this movement, and hence can find the academic environment hostile to them and their research.

Section II

Shimon Ballas and Outcast

> Clearly, Mizrahi literature is an Israeli cultural phenomenon, and yet these creative manipulations of cultural residue, these "hauntings" of lost worlds, tie much Mizrahi writing to histories and contexts outside the purview of mainstream Hebrew literary scholarship.[24]

The examination of the Arab Jewish community in this project will focus on the work of Shimon Ballas, an Israeli author born in Iraq. In Ballas' only work translated into English, *Outcast*, I will examine the concepts so important to Mizrahi studies. Acknowledgement of Jewish life before and outside of the state of Israel, a distinct cultural connection to the Arab world, feelings of exile within Israel, the marginalized place of Arab Jews in the region today, and other topics. Through this fictional lens, Ballas has managed to open a discussion about so many of the issues important to the Mizrahi and Arab Jewish community, and the Middle East as a whole, over the past century.

Shimon Ballas was born in Baghdad in 1930 and immigrated to Israel with the rest of the Iraqi Jewish community in 1951. Ballas became politically active in the communist party in Baghdad before he left, as documented in the film *Forget Baghdad*. Political participation in national Iraqi parties, not explicitly Jewish ones, was a not unusual for a Baghdadi Jew of that time.

[24] Levy, Reorienting, 132.

Upon first coming to Israel Ballas wrote in Arabic, his native tongue and continued to do so for several years. Within ten years of immigrating he learned Hebrew and has written and published mostly in that language ever since. Ballas is both a Hebrew novelist as well as a scholar, and has published several academic works on Arabic literature. As an author, Ballas identifies himself as outside of Hebrew literature for several reasons. His works resonate with influences from the Arab world of literature and politics to this day, a historical education that many Hebrew speakers lack or do not relate to. His writing is rarely translated, unlike Ashkenazi literature, which is frequently consumed in the United States to a very high degree. His experience as a Je sdoes not fit into the accepted conception of Israel and Jewish life that most Americans have, his historical narrative is not told.

Ammiel Alcalay describes Ballas' body of work thus:

> Ballas has forged a possibility unusual for Hebrew fiction, that of the internal exile attempting to reenact the political complexities of a surrounding world that has been declared forbidden territory.[25]

Ballas not only engages the Baghdad of his past in his literature but imagines the Arab experience today in a way that is denied most Jews. Ballas' experience as part of the intellectual elite in Iraq before he immigrated to Israel, and his continued connections, informs his work and creates a dialogue with a community, an identity that is not considered relevant within the wider Zionist/Arab nationalist framework; that is, an Arab Jewish identity that can converse with the wider Arab world.

[25] Alcalay, *After Jews*, 11.

Outcast (והוא אחר) was originally published in Hebrew in 1991 and was only translated into English in 2007 and is to date the only one of Ballas' works that has been published in English. The fictitious autobiography is based on the real life and work of Ahmad Nissim Susa, an Iraqi Jew who converted to Islam and wrote prolifically during the twentieth century. Ballas fictionalizes the real autobiography of Susa by maintaining many of the same life events but changing the details. Bashkin explains the relationship between the autobiography and the novel.

> The novel, nonetheless, is different from the autobiography since it critiques certain aspects of Susa's life by allowing other voices to enter the narration. Moreover, it elaborates and expands on points where the narrator of the autobiography is either silent or complies with the national discourse, particularly regarding Susa's desertion of his son and wife. In consequence, it both explicates and criticizes the autobiography.[26]

In this way he incorporates a true, but alternative, Arab narrative into the story of the Middle East. The nature of the book makes it historical as well as fictional, blurring the lines between the two. Here we can return to our concepts of narrative from the introduction, in which we discussed the painting of history in nationalist colors. Ballas uses both historical and personal narrative to write a story not without its own perspective and biases, but one that seeks an alternate truth, an alternate history even, to those the world has been sold about the Arab Jews.

The novel tells a story that encompasses so many events in the Middle East during the twentieth century. We see the rise and decline of the communist party and Marxist

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[26] Orit Bashkin, "When Dwelling becomes Impossible: Arab Jews in America and Israel in the Writings of Ahmad Susa and Shimon Ballas" In *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished Scream*, edited by Zahia Smail Salhi and Ian Richard Netton (New York: Routledge, 2006) 93.

groups, the expulsion of Khomeini from Iraq, the exodus of the Jewish population from Iraq and the creation of the state of Israel, the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war, the many coups that occur in Iraq, and the end of colonialism and the mandate system. Told from the narrator's personal and unique perspective, and through the relationships he has with his close friends, the reader bears witness not only to the transformation of his world but also that of the region as a whole. In this way Ballas makes a broad connection to the greater academic dialogue by connecting the Jews in his book to the events of the age.

The narrator, Dr. Ahmad Haroun (Harry) Soussan, was born the younger son of a wealthy Jewish family in the village of al-Hila outside of Baghdad. Haroun, a prominent man in Baghdad society, claims to be writing a confession, a story he has been unable to tell before and one he expects will not be published in his lifetime. This being the case, the story fluctuates between the late 1970's, when he is actually writing, and his memories throughout his life, following his train of thought in a fashion that clouds his timeline, the relationship between characters, and people's identities.

More than anything else, Haroun's story is about human connections and how they tie a person to a place, more than physical geography ever could. His personal relationships, which each represent a different current in his life pulling him one way or the other, offer the real shining moments in Haroun's recollections. Haroun's closest friends, several of them from his childhood, open up a dialogue not only on the Jewish population but on society as a whole. They articulate the diversity of the Jewish community in Iraq and their involvement in all of the same political and social movements as the non-Jewish population. The relationship between the group of friends

can be seen as a representing the intellectual currents of the age; nationalism, Zionism, socialism/communism and others. As these different ideologies fought it out in the regions and amongst the different religious, linguistic and geographic communities, the political dynamics of the past that allowed for a certain tolerance were lost. The Jews of the Arab world were left with Zionism or nothing, as they became colluded with that enemy in a world that had become black and white.

Qassem Abd al-Baki came from a peasant family of unknown religious affiliation in al-Hila, participated in the rocky political scene in Baghdad and was eventually forced into exile. Haroun describes him as an opportunist, whose political fervor distinguished him from those who were more prudent in their political expression. Qassem, an active member of the Communist party, fell victim to the turbulent political atmosphere of Iraq in the middle of the century, as coup followed coup and each successive government removed the supporters of its predecessors. Qassem is sacrificed on the altar of nationalism, and spends the remainder of his life in exile.

Qassem represents the hope of the proletariat, and the disappointment of the Arab street after colonial and semi-colonial rule ended in dictatorship and monarchy for most of the region. Qassem's sad demise can be felt as the dashed hopes of so many, either believers in the West or the Soviet model. Qassem is also important as he links Jewish hopes to those of the greater Arab world. Religion is not an important demarcation for Qassem and his Jewish communist brothers are on equal terms with the rest. This type of political inclusion ultimately failed, but it was one in which many Jews were invested, both before and after the creation of the state of Israel.

Assad Nissim, another childhood friend from al-Hila, grows up to become a political and cultural leader in the Jewish community. He is a writer, editor, and community advocate whose dual identity tears him apart. Assad is the only Jewish character Haroun has contact with after he is cut off from the community after his marriage. His dual nature, his allegiance to the Jewish community and his love for Iraq, eventually drive a wedge between him and Haroun. In describing Assad throughout the book, one is reminded of the definition of Levantine from Kahanoff's work: "to be a Levantine is to live in two worlds at once without belonging to either."[27]

Assad doesn't leave Iraq in 1951 with the majority of Iraqi Jewry, but instead stays on until the early 70's, when he and his family leave in secret. His departure is considered a great betrayal, as Haroun describes him as an admired political and cultural figure up until his hr leaves. His is the failed attempt as a Jew to fit into the rapidly shrinking Arab world. His departure is a sad defeat and one keenly felt by Haroun.

These three characters as friends are of essential importance in terms of some of the broader debates. Haroun the convert, from Judaism to Islam, Assad the patriotic Jew, and Qassem, a communist of unknown religious background interact help compose a picture of a multicultural society, at least in the educated classes. What the readers are shown is a city well suited to its diverse population, but with problems like any other place. This seems to negate the idea that Israel saved the Arab Jews from their lot in the Middle East. Yet Ballas also complicates this picture as we see the growing tensions not only directed at the Jewish community but at dissenting voices. Like many of the

[27] Star, *Mongrels*, xxii.

scholars discussed above, Ballas articulates a relationship between the Arab world and its Jewish citizens that is complex and multidimensional, and defies the simplicity of any one grand narrative.

Memory and History, Exile and Loyalty

Haroun is an engineer by training but a historian by hobby, and he has written a history of the Jews that has become both wildly popular and a weapon to justify the government's behavior towards the Jews. The real man, Susa, did publish such a book and it was popular for the same reason. Haroun is rewriting history by rewriting the history of the Jews, in contrast to the ways in which Zionism has written an alternate history of the Jews of the Middle East. That Haroun objects to the use of the history he wrote for purposes he didn't approve of is proof of the power of his historical narrative. Haroun becomes a tool, makes himself into a tool, for the use of the Iraqi regime and the greater anti-Jewish cause through the history he writes.

In terms of Haroun's format, memoir is not a great historical source because authors often portray the past, and themselves, in a skewed manner, more so than in other documents. In *Outcast*, memoir and biography are the narrator's tools with which to write his history and the history of Iraq. The writing of history is a move of power, and the better story tellers, those who can compel the most people to believe in their story, are awarded the victory. Ballas uses memoir as a mirror with which to reflect all the distorted narratives of the history of the Arab Jews and challenge his readers to find truth amongst them.

Haroun's disregard for place and time in his narrative creates a sense of memory as place. The reader often doesn't know if the narrator is referring to recent or chronologically distant events, whether it is past or present, memory or "real life". This disregard for time combines with the author's disregard for location and setting. Haroun's movements between locations in Iraq and abroad are not always clear and neither are the other characters'. Both Assad and Qassem are in exile, but other than a recording of Assad's voice, it's almost as if they are lost in a geography not accessible to Haroun. This reflects the collective memory of Arab and Mizrahi Jews of a place they can no longer return to and that, in reality, no longer exists for them. He spends very little time in the city itself, generally writing in his home and moving around by car. During one of their arguments Assad calls Haroun a "Jew from without" perfectly encapsulating the isolation of the few Jews left today in the Arab world who, while rooted in their ancestral lands, are so cutoff from what has today become the center of Judaism, Israel.[28] Haroun is not the only Jew from without but his condition mirrors that of the mass of Mizrahim who left their lives and histories behind in the Middle East only to join the Israeli/Zionist as Jews from without. Their participation was never an essential and founding aspect of the Zionist project and their inclusion as an afterthought has had mixed success.

One of the many things that Ballas attempts to do in this work is paint a picture of what might have been, to connect the pre-Israeli Arab Jewish past in Iraq with something other than the exodus and second exile in Israel. This is articulated through several

[28] Ballas, *Outcast*, 89.

characters, who show the hope some had of returning. Haroun, in his academic work, compares the role of the Jews in Iraq with that of the Christians in Egypt and Syria, communities he feels have successfully included themselves in Arab nationalism. Without addressing the problems faced by these minority communities, the narrator laments that Iraqi and Arab Jews were unable to successfully integrate because of Palestine, because of Israel. In the same vein, Qassem optimistically exclaims that the Jews will return to Iraq.

> They'll come back over time. We'll call upon them to return, Iraq is their homeland, and here is where they must be to participate in the building of the republic.[29]

And yet there was not return, there is no longer a place for the Jews in Iraq or the rest of the Arab world.

To be certain, Ballas is not only looking at what could have been had it not been for Israel, and despite Haroun's anti-Jewish feelings, there is evidence of criticism of the whole Middle East project. While Haroun openly criticizes the Jewish community for its close-mindedness and their desertion of Iraq, Ballas shows the reader the tragedy of life under the many Iraqi regimes and the failures in other aspects of society. Qassem's treatment at the hands of the changing governments, going from Baghdad to jail to a post in the government, back to jail again and eventually into exile, is part of this tragedy. The censorship that is evident in everything Haroun does, and that is criticized by his son-in-law so openly, as well as his being passed over for a post in the government, first because he was Jewish and then because he was unwilling to participate in the corrupt

[29] Ballas, *Outcast*, 185.

system, are part of this narrative. Ballas is not telling an idealized version of the Arab Jewish past, but instead is trying to tell the version of the story that was lost in the 1950's, and subsequent years, as it was absorbed into the greater story of Israel and Palestine.

The characters' geographic connection to the land and people of Iraq fly in the face of Zionist discourse on exile, which sees the Jewish communities as waiting out an exile only for the possibility of return to the Holy Land. When Haroun is in Beirut and meets Kazem for the first time, they are able to identify each other as coming from the same place, and rejoice in this connection with no regard to their religious differences. They share a homeland, which is the most important characteristic for them when they are abroad. Haroun does not feel a sense of exile until after he is isolated from the community and then converts to Islam. He creates his own exile within his homeland, as circumstance, and his own stubbornness, cut him off from everyone he loves. Haroun is the ultimate nationalist, willing to sacrifice communal and religious identity at the altar of the nation. Jane, seeing from outside the situation that Haroun cannot, tries to tell him how he is destroying himself when she says "you are loyal to the homeland but the homeland isn't loyal to you."[30]

For Assad, another who was sacrificed to the nation, so much was lost when the community left in 1951, but he held on because his attachment to Iraq was strong. When Assad does eventually leave, Haroun cannot imagine his friend, the ardent Iraqi poet and patriot, fleeing to Israel, into the arms of the Zionist enemy. Ammiel Alcalay poetically

[30] Ballas, *Outcast*, 103.

describes the results the departure had on Arab Jews who were then indoctrinated into a narrative that reclaimed their experiences to be used for political purposes.

> The forgotten, distorted world – willed into oblivion by the discourse of 'deliverance' and the ideology of return's tunnel vision – is faced like an ecological disaster, as an inseparable part of the eroded self.[31]

Years after Assad leaves, Haroun obtains a recording of Assad talking about his youth in al-Hila. It had been made and broadcast in Israel but was censored in Iraq, so it could never air for public consumption. The combination of the voice of a friend who is forever lost because of geopolitical barriers, and a his discussion of his childhood, which suffers from the passing of time as much as the changing of society, is telling of all that Haroun, and Iraq, has lost.

> I can't figure out what fault they could have found with what he said, when he recounted his childhood in al-Hila, and his extensive literary work. Does anything refute Zionist propaganda about Jews yearning for the land of their fathers more than this strong connection to the homeland, expressed by someone who had been one of its most loyal sons? I listen to his soft voice, saturated with longing, and tears well up in my eyes: here, at this point, we connect again, over a breach of many years, in our love for our native town, the Princess of the Euphrates, as he had eulogized in one of his poems![32]

The assumption on Haroun's part is that Assad is in exile in Israel as much as Qassem is in the Czech Republic, both great Iraqi patriots no matter their religion.

Ben-Dor, while discussing the exilic state of Iraqi Jews and its presence in their literature and collective identity, points out that the unique element of the Iraqi-Jewish view of their past is not only exilic but looks specifically to the moment of departure as a

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[31] Alcalay, *After Jews*, 258.
[32] Ballas, *Outcast*, 55.

traumatic event. [33] Exilic literature is common in Hebrew from the entire community, not just the Arab Jews, but the focus is more nostalgic than traumatic, and doesn't revolve around traumatic departure. The Jewish exodus from Iraq was arranged over a very short period of time, with a millenniums old community dissipating in months. The geographic distance between Iraq and Israel was small but the extreme difference in the place of the Iraqi Jews in Israel was a supreme shock to many. In *Outcast*, the plot seems to swirl around the event of the departure without really discussing it. He mentions it only in reference to Assad, who doesn't leave with the rest either. Levy describes Baghdadi authors and the pain of watching the community come to an end.

> Jewish writing on Baghdad, above all, yields a profound identification with the city that is interwoven with alienation from it – a kind of psychic split that culminates in the experience of watching your own history end even as you are still living there in it.[34]

Haroun, in the context of the return, the ingathering of the exiles, removes himself from the Zionist story. His conversion, however, disconnects him not only from the path of the Jews from Iraq to Israel, but also from the path of the Iraqis around him. He is an anomaly as a convert from Judaism and despite his newfound Islamic identity, it is never forgotten that he was a Jew, especially after the community is conspicuously absent. He disrupts the historical narrative of the Zionists, he is able to see those around him, Jewish, Muslim and Iraqi, from an outside perspective. His isolation is evident throughout the book and speaks to his place as a Muslim who still has attachments to his Jewish identity,

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[33] Zvi Ben-Dor, "Invisible Exile: Iraqi Jews in Israel" *The Journal of Interdisciplinary Crossroads,* Vol. 3 (April 2006): 140.
[34] Levy, "Self and the City," 168.

an inversion of someone like Shimon Ballas who writes to a Jewish audience with regard to his attachments to his Arab past. What Haroun manages to do is be neither, while seeking to be both.

Ballas' format, characters and themes are so tied to place, geography, identity and time. While *Outcast* is fictional, Ballas plays with the line between history, memory and imagination and in this way calls them all into question. This is almost a response to all of the grand narratives, the isms of the age. Ballas humanizes, localizes and personalizes a situation that most, including this essay, have made into something impersonal. The devastating end of the Iraqi Jewish community in Iraq can only be realized with hindsight, but the people involved at the time, they have experiences that were special and are important in the context of the larger narrative.

Connections and Conclusions

What does the future hold for people like Shimon Ballas and his peers, when talk today is all about the successful integration and mixed marriage of Mizrahi Jews with the Ashkenazim? While Ballas is not completely representational of Arab Jews, many of whom would be unhappy with their association with the Arab world and would not identify themselves as Arab at all, he is part of a larger trend which does seek to acknowledge their Arab past. The collective Arab Jewish or Mizrahi identity is by no means uniform and some felt the sting of rising resentment, others suffered violence and many were just not as integrated into the local culture as the Iraqi Jewish community was. And yet there has been an upsurge in Mizrahi identity politics and a renewal of interest in the non-European roots and traditions of many Jews today. The response to this trend from Ashkenazim has also not been uniform, as opinions differ across that community as well. The political and academic collective action of Arab Jews and Mizrahim reinforces the importance of that same agenda.

Much of this piece has addressed the Arabness of the Jews from the Arab world, but has not addressed the connections of these Jewish communities with the Arab world today. Part of the reason for that is that there are so few connections with that world, which makes Shimon Ballas and his contributions especially important, as his career still blurs the lines that many are no longer able to cross. The Palestinians are generally the focus of any discussion of Israel and the Arab world, and yet I have avoided talking about them up until this point. There is an argument that the threats to security and stability

posed by the Palestinian question have been used by the government to brand any dissenting voice, like that of the Mizrahim, as divisive and unsafe. Here, to some extent, I have attempted subvert the silencing effect of the conflict by addressing the sociocultural and socioeconomic divisions that are a reality regardless of the conflict.

One can see, through the scholarly works of Ella Shohat, Ammiel Alcalay and others in the field of modern Mizrahi Studies that there is an alternative narrative to that of the Zionist one upon which the state of Israel is founded. In the work of Shimon Ballas and other Arab Jewish authors, artists and thinkers, attempts are made to unearth a different history, one that incorporates the Arab part of the term Arab Jew. Literature like *Outcast* has the ability to do something that most academic works cannot do, and this is why both kinds of publications must be included. Literature, like art, music and poetry, is able to document and analyze history as much as any historian, but in a fundamentally way. Literature speaks from below, is intensely and purposefully personal and subjective. Within literature one can also tell alternate histories, ask what ifs, and twist reality. In *Outcast*, Haroun and his friends are part of a wider debate, a wider history that is not only fictional but ongoing, present and relevant to the readership. So entwined in contested realities, Ballas is creating his own reality of Iraqi and Arab Jewish life and identity along the borders of both communities.

Ballas' own experience as an immigrant and Arab Jew was very different from many of the Mizrahi scholars discussed above who for the most part come from the second generation, or the new Mizrahim, yet his work can be read in conjunction with more academic work. This is not to discredit the creative and artistic nature of Ballas'

literature, but he is engaging with an audience that to some extent is aware of the ideological currents I have referred to above. *Outcast*, for the most part, is not about Israel and yet the events portrayed in the novel have come to shape the great debates that take place there today. While there was a time when most Arab Jews had no interest in the Zionist project, they are now part of the results of that project and part of Israeli society. While this project has attempted to examine the history of this community alternative to the Zionist picture of it, it also seeks to examine the way in which this community, for better or for worse, has come to be a part of Israel and is therefore part of the Zionist narrative. What something like the *Outcast* adds is another voice and perspective, in addition to and alongside Zionism, nationalism, and Mizrahi studies.

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